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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 000107

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STATE FOR AF/E, AF/PDPA

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KPAO ET

SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: MINISTER BEREKET OFFERS EPRDF VIEWS ON  
JAILED UDJ LEADER, CSO LAW, ETHIOPIA'S DEMOCRATIC  
TRAJECTORY AND IMPROVED RELATIONS WITH VOA

REF: A. ADDIS ABABA 63  
¶B. ADDIS ABABA 31  
¶C. 08 ADDIS ABABA 3116

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

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¶1. (C) The Ethiopian government (GOE) will not release the re-jailed Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) leader Birtukan Mideksa (Ref A) because the state must uphold rule of law and Birtukan violated the terms of her pardon, long-time Special Advisor to the Prime Minister Advisor and newly appointed Minister of Communication Affairs Bereket Simon told the Ambassador on January 15. Bereket explained that the recently passed Charities and Societies Proclamation (Ref B), which regulates civil society organizations (CSOs), will not affect development activities but is important because it encourages Ethiopia to develop indigenous capacity. "Democracy is an existential issue for Ethiopia," Bereket said, offering the views of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and adding that democracy is necessary to ensure Ethiopia's peace and stability. Ethiopia hopes to broaden democratic participation through the empowerment of successful rural and urban entrepreneurs who have a stake in the constitutional order and can represent their own interests peacefully, Bereket added. Ethiopia will permit opposition parties to campaign freely in the 2010 national elections, Bereket said. Bereket described the role of the new Communications Affairs Bureau, which will coordinate government messaging and public diplomacy in Ethiopia following the dissolution the Ministry of Information, and lauded improved communication between the Ethiopian government and the Voice of America's Horn of Africa service (Ref C). End Summary.

¶2. (C) On January 15, the Ambassador held a working lunch with Bereket as part of Embassy efforts to reach out to EPRDF central committee members. PAO and A/PolCouns participated. Bereket noted he will travel to the United States this summer for his first visit in more than ten years. PAS offered to facilitate meetings for him in Washington at his request.

GOE Will Not Budge On Birtukan

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¶3. (C) The Ambassador pressed Bereket to help resolve the

issue of re-jailed opposition leader Birtukan. In response, Bereket said that the GOE had given Birtukan "every chance" to abide by the terms of her pardon for her alleged role in the aftermath of the 2005 elections. Instead, Bereket said, Birtukan "transgressed the law" by violating the agreement and speaking about the circumstances of her pardon. If the Ethiopian government fails to uphold the rule of law in this case, Bereket said, rule of law will "be diminished" and the government will encounter serious "pitfalls." This matter is "related to issues of violence, and we can't give in to violence and pressure," Bereket said. Bereket noted that the GOE believes that the Ethiopian public is largely supportive of its measures in this case.

#### Bereket: CSO Law Will Not Impair Development Activities

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¶4. (C) Ethiopia's new CSO law will not in any way impair development activities that help the Ethiopian people, Bereket said. Citizens, Bereket added, should advocate for their rights without being financed by foreign countries. Bereket acknowledged that Ethiopia needs "constructive engagement" with its international partners and is more than willing to work on matters of mutual interest, but he said that the GOE should "be given the benefit of the doubt that we are doing good things for our country." The GOE's "basic interest is to transform the country developmentally and democratically," Bereket noted.

¶5. (C) "Both development and democracy are existential issues for us," Bereket said, explaining that, in the view of the

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government, Ethiopia needs a home-grown democracy and "we either do it or perish." Bereket observed that Ethiopia intends to abide by universal democratic principles such as separation of powers but will implement democracy in accordance with its own culture. Noting that every democratic system is different, Bereket remarked that "blanket acceptance" of Western recommendations had led many African countries to crisis because democracy cannot be imposed and populations were not prepared. Ethiopia has a good constitution, but the government must guard against opposition groups or terrorists and "those who see violence as the way out" from using democratic mechanisms to undermine Ethiopia's democracy, Bereket added. Ethiopia must rebuff the "African tendency to see politics as a zero-sum game," Bereket said, noting that the Ethiopian government wants to "streamline the opposition so they play by the rules and do not have to face consequences for transgressing the law." At the same time, "we do not want to stifle dissent," Bereket said.

#### Ethiopia's Three Cardinal Problems

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¶6. (C) Speaking on behalf of the EPRDF, Bereket said Ethiopia faces three "cardinal" problems that affect its stability: "backwardness" (which he described as the historical absence of democratic/good governance culture); poverty; and a historical lack of peace and stability. Bereket said the EPRDF sees the solutions to these three problems as interrelated and concurrent, not sequential. In Bereket's view, the EPDRF has prioritized democracy by necessity but must now place more emphasis on economic development. In addition, where good governance fails and promises of development are unmet, Bereket said, citing the Ogaden, "people get angry and violent."

#### Bereket Forecasts Free and Fair 2010 Elections

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¶7. (C) Bereket said the GOE wants to work together with legitimate opposition parties to create an "atmosphere of tolerance" in support of a stable, growing democracy, although he added that "sometimes the opposition sends the

wrong public messages that are not in the interests of the country or our international partners." Bereket said he believes that down the line opposition parties will be able to unseat the EPRDF, just as they won the Addis Ababa city elections in 2005, but he said he doubted they would have much success in the 2010 national elections because they have not built support in the countryside. Bereket added that, from the EPRDF's perspective, "we are a rural society with one interest group: farmers. Once the farmers give their support to one party, the others cannot get it. If the EPRDF loses the countryside, we can't hold power. We need the will of the people behind us: the gun won't work in Ethiopia now. We have almost sovereign regions. No army can control the regions without local support. If the EPRDF is defeated at the ballot box it would mean we have lost the regions. If we ever tried to retain control of the regions by force, it would lead to disaster."

¶8. (C) In response to the Ambassador's questions, Bereket said that he believes the 2010 elections will be as democratic and competitive as the run-up to the 2005 elections because "it is the proper thing to do." While the EPRDF will try to win, Bereket added, "the opposition will have sufficient space to pass their message." Although Ethiopian law mandates a three month campaign season, Bereket said he would like to stretch the campaign to six months or more. Bereket said Ethiopia's 2010 budget will include provisions for public financing for political parties, but added that campaign finance legislation has yet to be strictly implemented, but he hopes the National Election Board (NEB) will "look into it soon." NOTE: Opposition parties claim the law, which calls for parties to produce lists of all contributors, will effectively kill their funding because potential contributors will not want their names on lists that the government could use for retribution against opposition members. END NOTE.

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¶9. (C) Bereket acknowledged that some kebele (village) authorities may undermine democratic goals in their bid to hold onto their seats, but said that in a "fundamental departure from the past" the GOE is "working on two levels" to mitigate such effects. First, Bereket said, the government is seeking to ensure rural people do not equate income with government jobs by successfully creating rich farmers who can advocate for their own interests in a free market system. "We see a real capitalist class emerging," Bereket said, "with new economic forces that do not rely on the government. Rich farmers should be the leaders in rural areas. They can accept innovative ideas (that is how they built their wealth) and be role models. The government will be guided by these entrepreneurs and we want to expand this class to the urban areas. As they become more wealthy, they become more interested in peace and democracy to protect their economic interests." Likewise, Bereket said the GOE aims to accelerate urbanization in order to build a business class that can, through wealth generation, better support democracy by advancing Ethiopia economically. He added that the current opposition parties represent neither farmers nor business interests and therefore are "just political." Still, Bereket noted, the EPRDF is willing to restart interparty dialogue under the auspices of the National Electoral Board, and has identified parliamentary representatives for that purpose. Second, Bereket said, the GOE will reprimand "those even on our side who make mistakes" in overzealously pursuing partisan interests at the expense of democracy.

New Communication Affairs Bureau

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¶10. (C) Bereket offered details on the role of the new Communication Affairs Bureau, which replaced the Ministry of Information. Bereket said the Bureau will hold regular press conferences and attempt to respond in a timely manner to

media inquiries, Bereket said. Bereket will handle the official government response on "serious" issues but will ensure that trained spokespeople will be able to handle more routine responses. The Ethiopian government trained roughly 500 persons over the past year to work public relations in various ministries, Bereket said, about 250 of whom will work directly for the Bureau. Bereket said the Bureau will "connect the dots" for Ethiopia's inter-ministry process and ensure dissemination of and consistency of messaging throughout the government.

Improved Communication with Voice of America

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¶11. (C) Bereket praised Voice of America (VOA) Horn of Africa Chief David Arnold for improving communication between VOA and the Ethiopian government. Bereket noted that he had recently given an interview to VOA and that the service had fairly represented his interview on air. He added that although there is "history" between the government and VOA, he is willing to "give VOA a chance" as the Communication Affairs Bureau forms up.

YAMAMOTO